



# South Central District Health

*Keeping your family & community healthy*

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## **ESCHERICHIA COLI O157:H7 (*E. coli* O157:H7)**

### **What is *E. coli* O157:H7?**

*E. coli* O157:H7 are bacteria that can cause bloody diarrhea. The term "O157:H7" indicates a particular type of *E. coli* bacteria. Not all strains of *E. coli* cause illness.

### **Who can get *E. coli* O157:H7 infection?**

Anyone, but it appears to be more common in children than adults.

### **Where are the *E. coli* O157:H7 bacteria found?**

*E. coli* O157:H7 bacteria can be found in the intestinal tracts of infected humans and cows.

### **How is this bacteria spread?**

The bacteria are spread by eating food or water that is contaminated with feces (stool) of an infected animal or person. The most common cause of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection is eating undercooked ground beef. Raw milk can also contain the bacteria. An infected foodhandler can contaminate food by failing to wash hands after going to the bathroom. Hands that become contaminated while changing diapers may also spread the disease to others. Some people have become ill after swimming in lake or pool water contaminated with feces of infected persons or animals.

### **What are the symptoms of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection? Can it cause severe problems?**

The major symptoms are stomach cramps and diarrhea, which can look like bloody water. Other symptoms may include vomiting, fever and chills. Some people do not exhibit any symptoms or they may have mild diarrhea that is not bloody. In a small percentage of cases, the infection can cause the kidneys to stop working, especially in young children.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

The symptoms usually start two to eight days after exposure but usually within 3-4 days.

### **How long can an infected person spread *E. coli* O157:H7?**

An infected person can spread the bacteria to others for as long as the bacteria remain in the stool, usually one week but up to three weeks or more.

### **Should infected people be excluded from school or work?**

Since the bacteria are passed in the feces, children in daycare, health care workers, or people who handle food should not go to school or work while they have diarrhea. After diarrhea ends, the health department will help determine when an infected person may return to work or school. Some people may not be able to go back to day care or work until two stool specimens test negative.

### **What is the treatment for *E. coli* O157:H7?**

Most people get well on their own but it is important that anyone having bloody diarrhea seek medical attention. Antibiotics do not appear to help people get better faster and are usually not indicated. Persons with diarrhea should drink plenty of liquids to prevent dehydration.

### **How can *E. coli* O157:H7 infection be prevented?**

- Never eat rare or undercooked ground beef. Cook to 160 ° F or until the meat color is brown or gray.
- Do not drink unpasteurized milk or cider.
- Always wash any raw fruits or vegetables before eating.
- Always carefully wash hands before and after preparing foods.
- Always refrigerate meat products. Never leave raw meats at room temperature.
- Make sure children wash their hands carefully, especially after using the toilet or handling animals.
- Always wash hands with soap and warm water after using the toilet or changing diapers.
- Persons with diarrhea should not use public swimming facilities.
- Clean and disinfect diapering areas, toilets/potty chairs, toys, etc. at least daily and when soiled.